

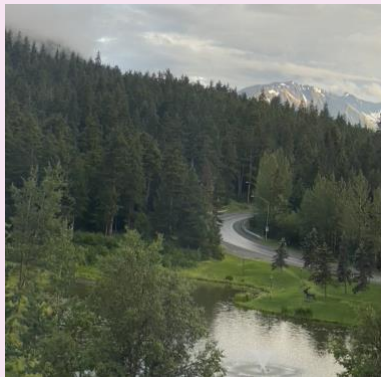
# WILD WONDERFUL ALASKA

## TRIP TO THE LAST FRONTIER

AUGUST 2022

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Alaska, the 49<sup>th</sup> State to be admitted to the Union, is a land of contrasts, from glaciers to rainforests to volcanoes, the westernmost point in United States and the [easternmost point](#), from days of complete darkness to days when the sun doesn't set. Alaska is also one of the places in the world you can appreciate the natural wonder of the northern lights and see the whales, bears, reindeer, and other wildlife.



Russian explorers were first to use the name "Alaska" during the Russian colonial period. The name was derived from the Aleut language "alaxsxaq" meaning "mainland."

When the opportunity arose for us to visit Anchorage-Girdwood, we took advantage of it. This is the most northerly destination to which we have travelled. The latitude in Anchorage was 61°17'59" N. Compared to the Arctic

Circle's coordinates of approximately 66°30' N, we were 5° south of the Artic Circle or 373 miles south of the Artic Circle sign. Maybe we'll be able to see that area next time. Alaska's nickname is "The Last Frontier," and during our visit, we definitely felt like we were in a special place inhabited by generous and friendly people who are very proud of their state.

Source for Map: Nations Online Project.

[https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/USA/alaska\\_map.htm](https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/USA/alaska_map.htm)

## LANDSCAPE AND CLIMATE

The Anchorage region has different landscape features: mountains, glaciers, volcanoes, and rainforest (yes, a rainforest in Alaska). The Alaska mountains are created by the force of plate tectonics, the subduction of the Pacific Plate to the North American Plate. The highest mountain in North America is Denali (Mt. McKinley, elevation 20,314 feet), which is approximately 160 miles north of Girdwood. The mountain range around Girdwood and Alyeska Resort are the Chugach Mountains.

Alaska is the northern most point of the Pacific Ring of Fire that has yielded earthquakes and volcanoes, as well as the tsunamis that their activities create. Encyclopedia Britannica provides this description of the Ring of Fire –

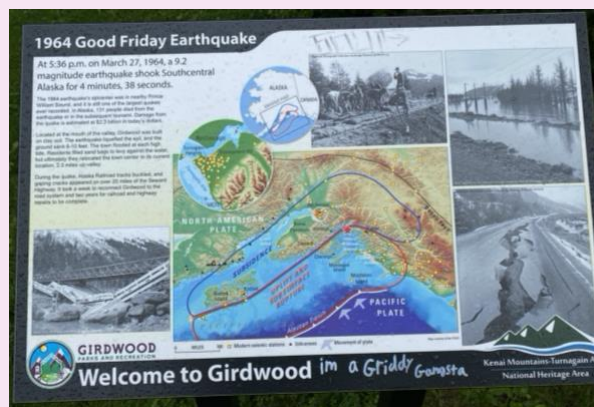
**Ring of Fire**, also called **Circum-Pacific Belt** or **Pacific Ring of Fire**, long horseshoe-shaped seismically active belt of earthquake epicenters, volcanoes, and tectonic plate boundaries that fringes the Pacific basin. For much of its 40,000-km (24,900-mile) length, the belt follows chains of island arcs such as Tonga and New Hebrides, the Indonesian archipelago, the Philippines, Japan, the Kuril Islands, and the Aleutians, as well as other arc-shaped geomorphic features, such as the western coast of North America and the Andes Mountains. Volcanoes are associated with the belt throughout its length; for this reason, it is called the "Ring of Fire." A series of deep ocean troughs frame the belt on the oceanic side, and continental landmasses lie behind. Most of the world's earthquakes, the overwhelming majority of the world's strongest earthquakes, and approximately 75 percent of the world's volcanoes occur within the Ring of Fire.

The Ring of Fire surrounds several tectonic plates—including the vast Pacific Plate and the smaller Philippine, Juan de Fuca, Cocos, and Nazca plates. Many of these plates are subducting under the continental plates they border. Along much of the western coast of North America, however, the Pacific Plate is sliding past the North American plate at plate intersections called transform faults.

Major volcanic events that have occurred within the Ring of Fire since 1800 included the eruptions of Mount Tambora (1815), Krakatoa (1883), Novarupta (1912), Mount Saint Helens (1980), Mount Ruiz (1985), and Mount Pinatubo (1991). The Ring of Fire has been the setting for several of the largest earthquakes in recorded history, including the Chile earthquake of 1960, the Alaska earthquake of 1964, the Chile earthquake of 2010, and the Japan earthquake of 2011 as well as the earthquake that produced the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004.

Earthquakes are frequently mentioned in discussions with guides, in particular the 1964

earthquake. The 1964 Good Friday Earthquake, registering 9.2 magnitude on the Richter scale ( $M_L$ ), shook southcentral Alaska for 4 minutes and 38 seconds. This is the largest



earthquake in American history and the second largest recorded earthquake. The tsunamis created by this earthquake caused damage not only in coastal Alaska but as far south as Crescent City, California (approximately 2,800 miles to the south). As a point of reference, Crescent City is 355 miles north of San Francisco on the Pacific Coast. Anchorage, Seward, Kodiak, and Valdez were hard hit by the earthquake. Only two structures stood in the former site of Girdwood after the earthquake (current Girdwood is 2.5 miles north of the old site). Since 1964, this area has seen continued seismic activity, including two powerful earthquakes - a 7.1  $M_L$  in 2016 and a 7.0  $M_L$  in 2018. A good read on the impacts of the 1964 earthquake is USGS publication - [The 1964 Great Alaska Earthquake and Tsunamis—A Modern](#)

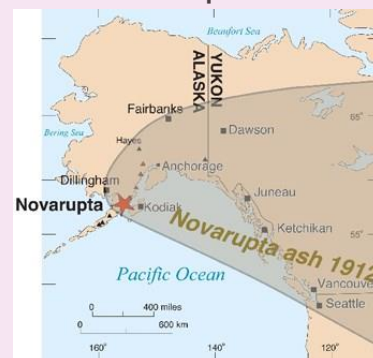


Another landscape feature mentioned frequently are volcanoes, and their presence can be felt in the region. Three of the more active Alaskan volcanoes, Mount Redoubt, Mount Augustine, and Mount Spurr, are located west of

Anchorage on the west side of Cook Inlet. These volcanoes have erupted recently and have blanketed the area with ash and have caused flight delays and local damage. Ash from Mt. Spurr's explosion in 1992 caused flight delays as far as Cleveland, Ohio. Mt. Redoubt exploded in 1989-90 causing extensive damage. There is an incredible story of a Boeing 747 that got caught in the ashes from the Mt. Redoubt eruption and lost power. The plane dropped 9,800 feet before power was restored and it miraculously landed. The most recent eruption was in March 2009. The Anchorage area had ashfall, and the eruption disrupted aviation in Alaska and the Pacific Northwest.

**Source of Map in the paragraph:** Alaska Volcano Observatory. **Photographer/Creator:** Schaefer, J. R.G. **URL:**<http://www.avo.alaska.edu/images/image.php?id=50341>

Another noteworthy event is the Novarupta – Katma explosion in the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes that occurred June 6-8, 1912. This volcano eruption was the biggest explosion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the fifth largest in recorded history. Mt. Katma's summit collapsed during the explosion and now has a caldera of 1.5 miles and 200 feet deep where the top used to be. The picture on left is the ash cloud

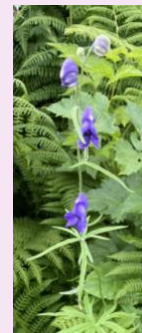


from Novarupta that quickly spread across Alaska and North America. Source: *USGS/J. Fierstein*

**Temperate Rainforest.** The rainforest around Girdwood is a part of a chain that stretches south to Northern California. In Alaska, the rainforest includes the Tongass National Forest. Temperate rainforests are cooler than their tropical counterparts. Other examples of temperate rainforests are Appalachian in southeastern



United States, Valdivian in southern Chile, and Taiheiyo Evergreen Forest in southern Japan. In our hikes around Alyeska Resort, we found Sitka Spruce, Western Hemlock,



Devils Club, and Salmonberry. The average annual rainfall for Girdwood is 70.92 inches, and some areas can receive as much as 100 inches.

We were in Alaska in August, and the temperatures were COLD, with highs in the mid 50s and lows in the upper 40s. It rained every day we were there. Some days, it would only rain for a couple of hours. We also had two days of rain that lasted all day and all night with big, cold rain drops. We had checked the weather forecast prior to our trip, and the forecast called for a 40% chance of rain for a day. That forecast was not accurate. The local people in Alaska all told us that Alaska weather changes all the time. They had a very nonchalant view of changes to weather, more like “so what, let’s get on with what we have to do.” Our advice is to pack a raincoat, sweaters, sweatshirts, mosquito repellants, hiking shoes or closed toe shoes, hat, and beanie. If you forget to bring an item, there are



shops available in Girdwood and Alyeska Resort. The picture on the right was taken at 10:15 pm, and we liked the long days. It usually got dark by 11:30 pm and was light by 5 am. If you visit in winter, be ready for a lot of snow, as this area gets on an annual average of over 800 inches (66' 8") or 1,000 inches (83'3") in snow fall depending on who you ask. Either way, that is a lot of snow, which makes Alyeska Resort an ideal place for skiing, snowshoeing, and snowboarding.



### **ALYESKA RESORT**

Alyeska Resort is about four miles north of Girdwood. Mt. Alyeska is the mountain for which the resort is named. The word "Alyeska" is Aleutian for "the great land."

Mt. Alyeska's elevation is 3,200 feet, and you can take Alyeska Aerial Tramway from the resort that takes you up to Mountain Station (2,300 feet). The resort also has access to hiking trails. The resort has bicycles for rent (including electronic bikes). Guests can book a sled ride with some of the dogs that have retired from the racing; at the end of the ride, you can hang out with the Alaska huskies. The tour group that arranges for this ride will pick you up at the resort by where the Tramway base is.



There are seven glaciers that are visible around Alyeska Resort. You can get a guided tour to the glaciers by a helicopter that takes you to the glacier where you can walk on it and drink glacier water. If flying on a helicopter is not appealing, you can drive 90 miles south towards Seward and visit Exit Glacier in Kenai Fjords National Park. At Exit Glacier, you can trace the glacier's path over time and the

effect the glacier movement had on the land through the soil and rock left behind, known as moraine.



A local delicacy we tried at the [Forte Alaska Restaurant](#) was Fireweed ice cream.

Fireweed, shown on the picture on the right, can be found growing wild in the meadows.

The ice cream was very nice. The picture also has "Bruce the Moose" - see if you can

spot it.



Spot the Bear



Alyeska Resort View from Mountain Station

## IDITAROD TRAIL – WINNER CREEK TRAIL



From the resort, you will find the Winner Creek Trail (which is part of the Iditarod National Historic Trail) in the Chugach National Forest. The Iditarod



Trail connects Seward in the South to Nome in the North and is 1,000 miles long. This trail is also used for the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog race. The trail is very well maintained, as it has well-groomed paths, boardwalks, and side railings. It is an easy trail to hike. The vegetation is very lush and green. Once we started hiking the trail, we kept mentioning that it was humid and felt like we were walking in a rainforest. After finishing our hiking,



we found out that yes indeed we were hiking in a rainforest. We saw waterfalls and a lot of different plants. We didn't hike down to where there is a river crossing as the hand tram at the Winner Creek Gorge was broken. The trail was



well used by runners, hikers, mountain bikers, and young families out for a stroll. The trail area does have wildlife such as bear and moose. We didn't carry bear bells to keep them away, so we lucked out that the only wildlife we saw were butterflies. The National Parks Service advises that bear bells do not warn the bear until it is close, so it's better to make noise as you hike. The trail is also an avalanche run zone, and there are signs to remind you that you are in an avalanche area. We had never thought of an avalanche area being in a rainforest. We took a picture of a sign that memorializes one of those avalanche's – Zug's slide (picture below).



Zug's Slide Sign on the Trail



Lot of sap on a tree



Waterfall

## TRAMWAY RIDE AND NORTHFACE TRAIL



We highly recommend taking the Alyeska Aerial Tramway up Mountain Station. From Mountain Station you can hike higher and get great views of seven glaciers,

Mt. Alyeska, the Glacier Valley, and Turnagain Arm. Also, as you



hike around Mountain Station, you'll see multiple waterfalls. The hike is strenuous as there is a steep elevation increase of 300 feet (picture on the right has the coordinates while hiking up).

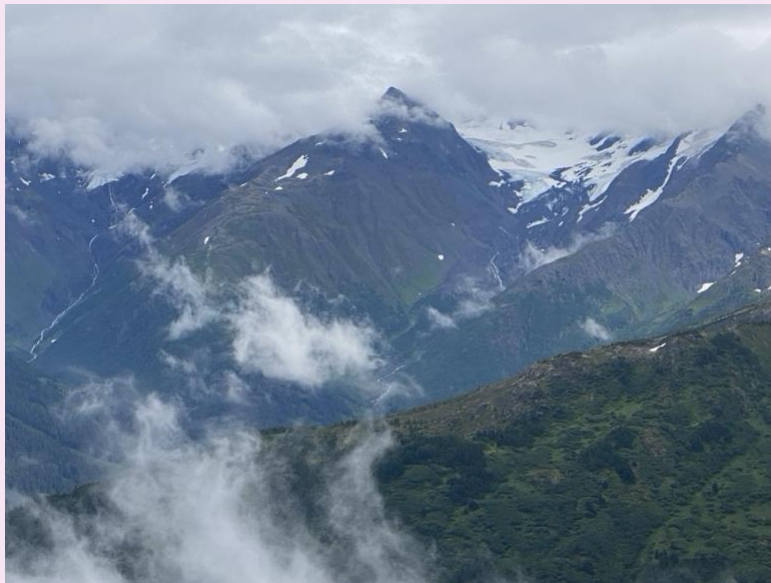


At the Mountain Station, there is a four-star restaurant (Seven Glaciers), Bore Tide Deli, and a museum called The

Roadhouse at Alyeska Museum. We ate at Bore Tide Deli and enjoyed the food and the view. The museum is worth a visit, as it is housed in an octagonal building that used to be a warming hut. It is on the National Historic Register.



Mountain Station and Turnagain Arm



View of Glaciers from Mountain Station

After lunch we decided to hike down to the resort by the North Face



Trail, with elevation loss of 2,200 feet in about 2 miles. Almost everyone hikes up the trail and takes the tramway down for free, but we decided to

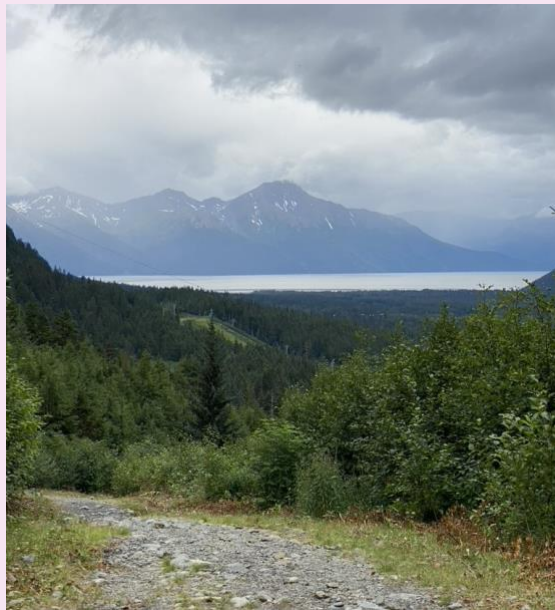


do the opposite. We encountered a couple hiking up the trail, and they warned us that going down was harder. Everyone we told afterwards that we hiked down thought we were, well, nuts. Hiking down the trail was agonizingly, brutal. My toes were completely bruised and battered to the point that I couldn't find my balance. Other than that, it was an absolute great hike with great views and lots of flowers. The trail had switch backs that reminded us of the Tour de France bike race around Alpe d'Huez. Ironically, my wife didn't have any problem coming down even though she wore her sneakers; I had opted for my best hiking shoes. I am going with sneakers next time, and we both agree we will hike up, not down.



Sign on the Trail ... Coming down doesn't feel like Stairway to Heaven





Turnagain Arm from North Face Trail

## GIRDWOOD



We didn't rent a car while we were visiting; instead, we relied on [Glacier Valley Transit](#). We found the service reliable, and the drivers are very nice and knowledgeable about the area. We provide a link to its web site that has the route and schedule. We



went to Girdwood for lunch and dinner. It's not a big town but has great options for eating. We ate at [Chair 5](#) in Downtown Girdwood.

While we waited for seats, we walked around the town square that has shops, restaurants, and the post office. Downtown is also home to Girdwood Laundromat, which boasts on a sign that it has been voted as America's #1 Laundromat. In case



you need to do laundry, here is a spot for you. Downtown also has a Boutique Inn (picture to the left) in case you want an alternative to a resort lodge. It's called [Ski Inn](#). There is a public plaza that has Girdwood's history and information about the 1964 earthquake. It's worth stopping to read about Girdwood's history, its change of name from Glacier City, and its evolution from a mining camp for gold miners to a resort community.



Girdwood History Monument Sign





Monument Sign about Gold in Glacier Valley

It will not come as complete surprise that we found the local



brewery, [Girdwood Brewery](#). We went in one evening around 6:30 pm thinking we had couple of hours before we had to head back around 8:30 to the resort. However, we learned that breweries must close at 8:00 pm by

Alaska law. The views from the brewery are great. The brewery's merchandise is popular with both locals and visitors. The brewery also has food trucks that are rotated on a regular basis. We visited the brewery twice so we could sample different food. We had to have savory crepes from [Crepes de Paris](#) food truck.



After one of our visits to the brewery we had a great interaction with someone from Girdwood. We were waiting for the public transport, and it was drizzling and cold. As we were waiting, we saw a bear



cub come out of the woods about 100 yards away from cross the street and run to the other side. We looked up the road and saw the sign in the picture to the left. As we were contemplating when we were going to see the mama bear and should we really be standing where we were, this nice young lady stopped and asked if we need a ride. She saw the

startled look on our faces and said, "You don't want to stand in the rain; get in!" We got in her car, and she drove us to our resort. As we mentioned to her how much we liked the area, she told us that she worked for an Adventure company. The name of the company she works for is [Alaska Wildland Adventures](#).



We also had an opportunity to eat at [Jack Sprat Restaurant, Fat and Lean Cuisine](#). The food is good, the service was good, and the setting is nice. To keep with the Mother Goose theme, there is also a shop called Mother Hubbard.

We hiked from Downtown Girdwood to the gas station, where Alyeska Road tees into the highway. The hike was very easy, and you can hear the river running next to you. On the side of Alyeska Road, planters were installed throughout the route. We



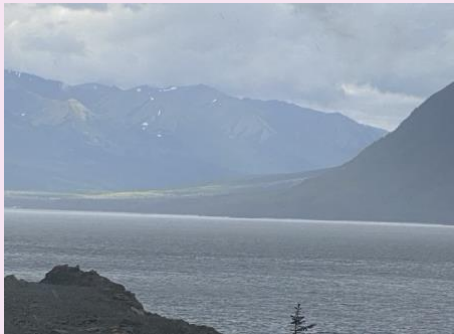




thought this was a nice addition to the route. We were told that Girdwood doesn't allow for fences for wildlife safety, so the wildlife doesn't get trapped. Yet, as we were hiking, we saw a house with fences around it.

## TURNAGAIN ARM - SEWARD HIGHWAY

From Anchorage to Girdwood, you take Alaska Route 1 (AK-1), or

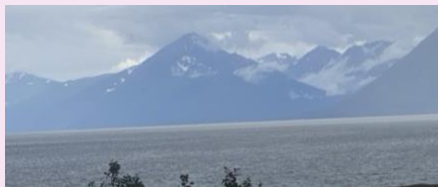


Seward Highway, south bound for about 40 miles. The highway runs parallel to a train track and the Turnagain Arm at the north end of Cook Inlet. Cook Inlet is named for Captain Cook. Captain William Bligh (of *H.M.S. Bounty* fame) served as Cook's

Sailing Master when Captain Cook was looking for the Northwest Passage and they sailed into Cook Inlet. The expedition didn't find the Northwest Passage, and Captain Bligh named this waterway as "Turnagain Arm" since it didn't lead them to the Northwest Passage. It is a very scenic drive of views of the Chugach



Mountains to the west and Kenai mountains to the east. We stopped



at Beluga Point and Bird Point to take in the scenery. We didn't see any Beluga whales, but this is an area to spot them. An interesting fact we were told is baby

belugas look like toasted marshmallows. From Beluga Point and Bird Point, you can also see a bore tide or tidal bore. A bore tide is a wave that is 10 feet high and is created when there is an extremely low tide created by a full or new moon. The bore tides in Turnaround Arm are considered one of the biggest in the world, and



surfers from around the world come to surf them. Glaciers feed Turnagain Arm, and it has a lot of glacial silt, which is like quicksand. Whatever you do on a trip to Alaska, don't walk out on the mud flats, as you will get stuck in them. If help

doesn't come in time, you will drown when high tide comes in. The picture to the right shows the glacial silt flowing into Turnagain Arm. We



also didn't have a chance to stop at Potter Marsh (10 miles south of Anchorage, west side of the highway), but it is a great spot to view wildlife. The trail, which is a wooden boardwalk, is about a mile loop and is considered one of the best bird watching spots. There are more than 150 bird species that call this marsh home.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

What an amazing trip! We met genuinely nice people; everywhere you looked was nature's beauty at its best; the food was good. We want to come back to Alaska to experience more of what Alaska has to offer: seeing the Northern lights, watching whales, visiting the westernmost and easternmost points of the United States ... we could go on. We will leave you with three pictures that made us smile and say, yes, this is the Last Frontier.



Restaurant Recommendations that we didn't get a chance to visit:

- [Aspen Café and Bakery](#)
- [Double Musky at Double Musky Inn](#)
- [The Ice Cream Shop](#)
- [Seven Glaciers Restaurant](#)

